

News & Information for Network Employees of VISN 8



Working Class Heroes

Orlando VA Medical Center, Vet Center Staff bring Care, Comfort to Stricken Orlando Community

by Mike Strickler, Deputy Public Affairs Officer
Orlando VA Medical Center

In the late afternoon of June 12, an Orlando VA Medical Center Mobile Medical Unit rolled into the Beardall Senior Center's north parking lot. The 3-story, red brick Beardall, once an elementary school and now a community center for Orlando seniors, sits just over a mile northwest of The Pulse Nightclub, a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-favored establishment on South Orange Avenue in the city.

As the Mobile Medical Unit began setting up, a Mobile Vet Center from Jacksonville, Fla. pulled in close behind it. Within minutes, medical and mental health providers from the Orlando VAMC were on hand, working to organize the staff and give guidance to those just coming in. In a matter of minutes, the VA stood ready to support the Beardall's grim purpose long before the shocked and dazed families began flowing in from the hot and humid Orlando afternoon.

Nearly 12 hours before, a lone gunman had attacked revelers at The Pulse Nightclub before succumbing to police gunfire. Many were dead and injured, and the city was still in shock when the VA arrived at the Beardall to provide support and comfort to families of the slain and wounded. Most who arrived there Sunday had no idea which category included their loved ones, and it would fall upon the VA and city responders to brief the families Sunday evening, and make formal death notifications Monday morning.

The mobile medical and vet center's arrivals were the first of many actions the VA undertook supporting the Orlando crisis. In the hours between the attack and VA's arrival at Beardall, a series of actions took place that launched the VA into a survivors' support role that would play out on national television and around the world.

Some decisions were planned, others spontaneous; some support occurred at the Beardall, some in adjacent communities, and some at the Orlando VAMC and Vet Center points of patient care. All efforts centered on supporting the city and her Veterans with world-class VA care in a dire situation, and at a moment's notice.

Over a period of 12 days, the Orlando VA Medical Center and the Veteran Health Administration's Vet Center program supported more than 5,000 people, many of whom are Veterans, in locations that spanned central Florida.

The support came in the form of deployed medical and mental health assets, family death notifications, grief and survivor counseling, coping skills, media engagement, mass communication, late-night phone calls, office visits, support groups, hugs, hands, food, water, tissues and many, many tears.

Editor's Note: This is a first person account of the VA's response to the tragedy that took the lives of 49 and wounded dozens more in Orlando on June 12 during the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history. Orlando VA Medical Center Public Affairs Specialist Mike Strickler tells the story and chronology of events of the VA response in a riveting, deeply personal way, **pgs 1-10**. Also, be sure to read the 'Anatomy of a Death Notification' as told by Orlando VA Psychologist Dr. Mary Beth Shea, **pg 11**.

Heroes — continued from pg 1 (Orlando response)

The VA stood united with Orlando; stood as part of her community as she grieved, rallied, protested, marched, healed, and ultimately survived a great tragedy. This is the VA's story.

Sunday, June 12:

For many of us, the VA emergency response began in the early hours of Sunday morning. I'm an early riser and had just sat down to coffee and my laptop around 6 a.m. when I first read the reports rolling into cyberspace.

Only hours before there had been a shooting at a local nightclub frequented by our LGBT community and I remember thinking that we were having one terrible weekend. The day's previous media reported the death of singer and *The Voice* contestant Christina Grimmie, who'd been shot to death at Orlando's Plaza Live, no more than four miles from the Pulse. These attacks seldom occur in Orlando so when Grimmie died the tension around the city rose palpably. Orlandoian's agreed via social media: *not here...not in Orlando...we're not that community.*

We're proud to have one of the largest and most vibrant LGBT Veteran communities in Orlando and our medical center LGBT program manager, **Keri Griffin**, keeps a dynamic schedule of support and service offerings, and has grown an impressive outreach for both patients and staff over the years. The Orlando VAMC employs medicine and care specifically for the LGBT community, focusing on their unique needs both in physical medicine and mental health.

So when word of the second shooting hit, the tension in the city went from palpable to horrific. It spread quickly through cyberspace, suggesting that Orlando had lost her innocence of terror, and quite possibly, some of her magic.

First word came to me from a local newspaper reporter and friend, **Naseem Miller**. Miller, a newspaper reporter, has the health beat for the *Orlando Sentinel* and her Twitter and Facebook feeds were pulsing with activity on a situation downtown. Twenty or more casualties were reported, others very possible, and the situation was fluid. A shooter, multiple deaths, and a possible terror connection spelled an all-too-common story for anywhere but Orlando, or so we thought, until tragedy added us to the long list of terror-stricken communities.

News reports flooded in, and Miller kept me updated via her social media channels. Orlando mayor Buddy Dyer went on camera around 10:30 a.m. and pronounced the situation much worse than thought: 49 were dead, and 53 injured. National media pronounced it the worst mass shooting in modern American history as Orlando VAMC employees began moving forward in support of the survivors and family members whose lives had changed drastically overnight.

That's an important aspect to note: our employees began moving forward without a phone call or recall to motivate them. **Dr. Paul Deci**, our Mental Health service chief, reported receiving calls from our mental health professionals early Sunday morning asking how and where they could help.

Members of our Emergency Management team reached out to other members, wondering where and when we would move forward, and with what assets. Even I received several text messages that morning from VA friends and employees. One such text said simply "I'm in – just tell me where and when to be there."

That the LGBT community had been specifically targeted in the attack sat heavy with the Orlando VAMC. The potential for this tragedy hitting us hard was evident with our strong LGBT program, but we'd not know just how difficult it would become for more than a day. Griffin's personal phone and e-mail were buzzing as early as 6 a.m. as she sat at home and read the messages and pleas from our LGBT community, a first-hand witness to a growing horror.

"I woke early to my cell phone blowing up with alerts – calls, texts, instant messages and posts on my Facebook page," she said. "I began reading and my world tilted."

"In a matter of minutes, the VA stood ready to support the Beardall's grim purpose, long before the shocked and dazed families began flowing in from the hot and humid Orlando afternoon."

VA Support: The Director's 50 — continued from pg 2 (Orlando response)

Griffin watched her son that Sunday as her husband worked, and found herself striking a delicate and difficult balance in keeping him attended to as the LGBT community sought her attention and support. The fluid social media responses threatened to consume her and the day was just beginning.

"I took countless calls, texts, and instant messages from friends & family; we were all grieving and I was trying to arrange support for my community as we found out more and more of who we may have lost, and who was injured," she said.

One of the first people Griffin reached was **Myra Brazell**, the Orlando VA Medical Center Suicide Prevention Coordinator. Brazell sped south on I-75 from the Florida Panhandle Sunday morning while working with Griffin to coordinate a boots-on-the-ground mental health response team as the VA formally stepped into the role.

"I'd been in Panama City that weekend with family when I received a text from one of my LGBT friends late Sunday morning," Brazell said. "It said simply that the Veteran was fine, and was sitting at the hospital with the family of a friend." Perplexed, Brazell reread the text as her Facebook Instant Messenger rung out with the bitter news. She headed immediately south.

The Orlando VA Medical Center Responds

While Griffin and Brazell's paths began converging, **VA Undersecretary for Health David J. Shulkin, M.D.**, had reached out to our director, **Timothy W. Liezert**, to see how the Orlando VAMC could help. Under Title 38, Code of Federal Regulations, the VA may share medical resources in response to natural and man-made disasters, as well as terrorist attacks on the United States. It is a role the VA considers very important.

Among its Emergency Management assets, the Orlando VAMC employs a Mobile Medical Unit and a Mobile Command Post, both 38-foot, RV-style vehicles that deploy to augment community resources in situations where medical facilities are not readily available. Also, the VHA's Vet Center Program can place mental health professionals in rural locations of the continental U.S. quickly, by using a similar fleet of Mobile Vet Centers, assigned to its Readjustment Counseling Services.

For the effort, four Mobile Vet Centers and 27 crisis counselors were immediately available from Pasco County and Jacksonville, Fla., and from Macon, Georgia, and Columbia, S.C. Each Mobile Vet Center comes complete with advanced communications capabilities, allowing them to operate independently anywhere in the country, and be augmented locally by counselors from adjacent VA points of patient care.

Luckily for the victims and survivors, adequate medical facilities existed near The Pulse Nightclub, which certainly saved lives. Similar facilities for concentrated mental health did not. It was in the mental health and counseling role that the VA believed it could be most beneficial, especially if deployed to the Beardall Senior Center, and also made available at key points in the local communities.

The Director's 50: Orlando VA Employees Spring Into Action

The decision was made to provide psychological first aid at the points of gravity where our mental health services would be most needed. The Orlando VAMC moved out quickly in that role by employing The Director's 50, known among employees as simply "The 50." The group consists of VA volunteers from most career fields who play an instrumental role in the speedy deployment of emergency management persons, services and assets.

As The 50 moved forward, Griffin would stay behind and support an overwhelmed LGBT community, currently hanging on her words of comfort and support, from the medical center. "It hurt me not being there, not being around my tribe as they suffered and reached out for comfort," she said. "But I saw the importance of my role and did my best to meet their needs as I strived to meet those of my family too."

"One of the hardest parts of my day was explaining to my son why I was so tearful, a conversation I was not ready to have about the evil in our world and how some people judge," she said sadly. "I showed him that we don't do that."

"It was in the mental health and counseling role that the VA believed it could be most beneficial, especially if deployed to the Beardall Senior Center, and made available at key points in the local communities."

Beardall Operations — continued from page 3 (Orlando response)

“As a social worker, my desire is to fix this, somehow make it better. ...But this is something I can only help to heal...and it will leave a big scar on all of us going forward.”
- Kerri Griffin

In the coming days, Griffin would communicate with hundreds of LGBT Veterans, some survivors of the attack and some family and friends of the lost and injured. She worked practically non-stop seeing scheduled and unscheduled patients, fielding phone calls, answering texts and instant messages, and posting responses to social media and secure message requests from Orlando and across the country.

She supported VA requests for information as she arranged drop-in support groups for the LGBT community, for family and friends of the slain and injured, and VA employees. She spent her off hours doing much the same from her home and in the community, riding a whirlwind of anger, frustration, hurt, heartache, grief, and anxiety that played out over a dozen difficult days. “As a social worker, my desire is to fix this, somehow make it better,” she said. “But this is

something I can only help to heal...and it will leave a big scar on all of us all going forward.”



**Keri Griffin, LGBT Special Program Manager
Orlando VA Medical Center**

Family Notifications: VA Team Moves To Beardall Senior Center

By the time **Myra Brazell** hit Orlando, much had happened. Liezert, driver Larry Brooks, and I had moved forward with the Mobile Medical Unit to Beardall via the Lake Baldwin VA Outpatient Clinic. Lake Baldwin served as a staging area for the MMU, and once we had confirmation on Beardall as the location for where the families would be notified, we moved out. Light traffic told of street closures and detours that made it a bit difficult to get into old town Orlando, but we managed it fairly quickly.

With the Mobile Medical Unit and the first Mobile Vet Center in place, our providers worked between the Beardall and the mobile vehicles to provide assistance. Our VA team roamed the Beardall hallways and conference rooms, talking with people as the situation began hitting home for them. Emotions flowed as family members crowded into the second floor conference room where first responders began a series of briefings to prepare them for what lie ahead.

Families were told the medical examiner and coroner were still working the aftermath of the shooting, and that they were not yet ready to provide the information they all desperately sought. The notifications, they said, could take place that evening, but most would be no earlier than Monday morning. The families wandered out as dazed as they had wandered in.

By evening, two more Mobile Vet Centers had arrived from Pasco County and Macon, and they took up positions adjacent to the Beardall. We gathered providers and responders to discuss hours and our intent for the following day, knowing how difficult that day would dawn.

Our intent remained one of support, and VA psychologist Dr. Mary Beth Shea took the lead in briefing the team, alluding to the possibility that our role may expand to participating in family death notifications.

A quick head count of mental health providers and families inside the Beardall showed a deficient balance...too many families, not enough community and VA providers. Myra Brazell, who had arrived on scene by 8 p.m., readily agreed that we would need more. She had “been there and done” that in her suicide response and prevention role, and the numbers weighed on her mind.

While on the way to Beardall, Brazell and Dr. Shea put out a call to VA mental health for support. “Those people called others and by the time I arrived we had more than 100 mental health professionals willing to support our efforts...the response was amazing,” Brazell said.

Support to Families — continued from page 4 (Orlando response)

We set operating hours for Monday at 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., closed the RVs at 11 p.m. when the parking lot at the Beardall emptied out, and most wandered home for a few hours of sleep. Brazell, however, had stayed behind.

Night Work

Earlier Sunday evening, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and Orlando Sheriff's detectives notified the VA they would be making some death notifications that evening, as immediacy is core in their public support role. Brazell had already traveled and worked a full day, but she volunteered to stay behind and ride with the medical examiner and law enforcement as they reached out to families of the slain.

The visits began around 9:30 p.m. Sunday evening and concluded at 7:30 a.m. Monday, as Brazell and law enforcement visited the homes and apartments of anxious families that held vigil into the night, hoping somehow their loved ones were not among the lost. When she and her escorts arrived with unthinkable news, the responses flooded her.

"I saw a magnificent response take shape as women enclosed the ones who'd lost a loved one, and men enclosed the women in support and solidarity," Brazell said. "To me, it looked like a blossom enveloping and enclosing...it was one of the most devastatingly beautiful outpourings of grief and support I have ever witnessed."

Monday, June 13

Family notification day arrived hot and humid as the VA team rolled in. The dynamic at the Beardall had changed significantly by 7 a.m. Monday, as the rush of families mixed badly with community supporters, local neighbors, lookie loos, and more than 50 national and international media outlets, all whom had come to the Beardall to experience the day first hand.

Orlando police circumnavigated the Beardall with a cordon of yellow tape to keep families in and spectators out, and stood posts at compass points to dissuade trespassing, and provide families much needed privacy.

As the day's first briefings began, our providers stood posts of their own. VA psychologists, social workers, nurses, and operations staff moved into the Beardall and its second floor conference room. As the families were called for notification, our providers attached themselves to medical officials and clergy to provide support as they learned their loved one's fate.

Orlando VAMC Nurse **Iris Appenrodt** and logistics supervisor **Louis Hawkins** took up a post at the Beardall's south entrance — the main entrance—to catch names and offer support to our providers upstairs. Often, they engaged directly with the survivors and their families.

"I remember standing at the curb Monday where I saw this young man just hugging himself and crying really hard," said Appenrodt. "I grabbed some tissues and went over to him, and he just hugged me really hard and held on while crying on my shoulder. I remember his tears soaked through my shirt as I held him until he regained his composure. It was that difficult Monday morning, and I keenly felt the overwhelming need for human companionship and connection, the need to 'be there' for friends and families," she said.



Orlando VA Medical Center and Mobile Vet Center providers prepare to assist families during death notifications June 13. From left : Dr. Ashley Arens, Dr. Mary Beth Shea, Dr. Bryan Batien, Elizabeth Jackson, and community provider Kaisha Toledo.

"It was in the mental health and counseling role that the VA believed it could be most beneficial...."

"VA psychologists, social workers, nurses, and operations staff moved into the Beardall (Senior Center) and its second floor conference room. As the families were called for notification, our providers attached themselves to medical officials and clergy to provide support as they learned their loved one's fate."

World Watches — continued from page 5 (Orlando response)

That afternoon, Dr. Shea approached Appenrodt with an urgent need for more mental health providers. She told her, “I know you’re a nurse, but you’re now mental health; go get a priest and join us in notifying families upstairs.”

“So, I get this huge lump in my throat at the prospect of making an official death notification but I swallow hard and say to myself ‘just suck it up, buttercup,’ and I head in,” Appenrodt said. “I grabbed a priest named Jay and he never left my side. We spent the rest of the day making notifications, providing guidance, just helping everyone get to and where they needed.”

“We closed the day back at the south entrance, but my role changed significantly from the morning...I had a purpose and the tools and guidance to make a difference.”

A Crush of News Media

National media had set up near The Pulse early Sunday afternoon with their trucks, satellites and canopies to shield television reporters and personalities from the midday sun. By Monday, most had dispatched crews to the Beardall to catch the first glimpse of families as they learned the fate of their loved ones.

They gathered first by the south entrance, just outside the cordon, but close enough for a medium lens to catch the flow of people in and out of the building. Having worked with many of the local media organizations over the past four years, and many of the national press in my career, I heard more than a few calling out, hoping to get some insight into what was happening inside.

The media conducted themselves appropriately and respectfully during the events, each showing a professional patience as the story played out. However, when the first of the notified families left the Beardall on the north side of the building, media outlets scooted around the building hoping to engage them as they passed through the cordon.

A young woman and her family were literally engulfed by dozens of media outlets as they read a prepared statement, and stayed on to answer questions.

The media crush continued throughout the morning and afternoon, and I was stuck by the comfort and knowledge that some families had in dealing with them, whether in broadcast, radio, print, or social disciplines. Many came prepared with statements for the press, in multiple copies, and very few shunned the spotlight when given the opportunity to appear and speak.

During the day, I spoke with two local media agencies and three national outlets seeking comment on VA services. Our first interview occurred with the Orlando Sentinel, as Miller found me outside the Beardall and requested to speak with Dr. Bryan Batien, an Orlando VAMC psychologist whom had first served as an infantryman in the U.S. Army before using his G.I. Bill to attend school. Dr. Batien also worked with the University of Central Florida in its Veterans Service Center, helping service members with posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries return to school.

The Sentinel interview released the first information about the VA’s support of the shooting, and shortly thereafter, I did a short standup interview with Central Florida News 13 describing the VA support, which also made the noon reports. Within minutes of the Sentinel story posting online, I received requests from CNN, The Huffington Post, and MSNBC to have Dr. Batien appear and discuss our efforts.



More than 50 national and international news media outlets descended on The Pulse Nightclub and the Beardall Senior Center in Orlando June 12 to 14. Above: a family who lost a loved one addresses the media.

VA Responds in Orlando — continued from page 6 (Orlando response)

However, the openness the families displayed with the media and the announcement of President Barack Obama’s trip to Orlando later that week encouraged the news outlets to seek more direct coverage. The Sentinel story was picked by the Associated Press and echoed in outlets around the world, while pulled quotes from Dr. Batien’s interview found their way into many other news stories. Our pitches to Spanish-speaking media outlets went initially unanswered as we tried to reach deeper into the community to ensure those needing our support knew where to find it.

Among the families, friends and providers, a few activists found their way into the Beardall hoping to remain inconspicuous as they wandered from family to family, asking questions about assault weapons and the LGBT lifestyle. As one of the Public Affairs officers on site, I was asked by police to intervene and find out if they were media, and I was only too happy to oblige. These were rare instances, and in all cases, the offending party was quietly interrogated and quickly shown the door.

By end of day Monday, all but four families had been notified, and as they were, the Senior Center emptied out. Literally thousands of people had passed through the doors in less than two days, as had many cases of water, endless platters and boxes of food and drink, protein bars, sweets, ice cream, and therapy dogs. At one point in the late afternoon, we had more dogs in the building than people needing support, but the canines’ presence was keenly felt and greatly appreciated.

I remember encountering Journey, a Golden Retriever with a prosthetic limb, panting and smiling away as hands reached out to stroke his coat, allowing the suffering to take in his beauty and acceptance among their tragic circumstances.

The VA remained at the Beardall overnight on Monday, once again closing its services at 11 p.m. An expanded crew of mental health providers was slated for the next day, including those with Spanish-speaking skills as many of the afflicted were of Hispanic and Latino origin.

Tuesday, June 14

We arrived at the Beardall early Tuesday morning to prepare for the CNN interview that was ultimately cancelled. The difference in focus from the previous day was immediately obvious in the parking lot where most spaces remained unoccupied, and all media attention had shifted elsewhere.

Although we were thoroughly prepared for a heavy day of support, the need never materialized at the Beardall, and by late morning, the city had informed first responders of a developing plan to move support operations to another location, one offering increased space that was much removed from the crime scene area.

While the families and survivors drew the majority of the deployed VA team’s attention, our providers did an outstanding job of taking care of one another and especially the law enforcement officers who had spent more than 40 hours wading through the aftermath of the shooting. Orlando VAMC psychologist **Dr. Margaret Arnott** recalled an instance Tuesday of encountering an Orlando policeman outside the Beardall who had been on duty for the three days in which the attack and aftermath played out.

“He related to me, while standing in the 100+ degree temperatures, how the calls and text messages from the victims had first alerted responders to the attack at the Pulse, and how those pings and beeps continued to echo in the hands and clothing of the dead (via cell phones) when police arrived on the scene,” Dr. Arnott said. “We ensured we remained available to them, and offered our mobile (vehicles) so they could escape the heat and seek some private, reflective space as they came to grips with the horrors of those moments.”

“So, I get this huge lump in my throat at the prospect of making an official death notification, but I swallow hard...and I head in.

“I grabbed a priest named Jay and he never left my side. We spent the rest of the day making notifications, providing guidance, just helping everyone get to and where they needed.”

*- Iris Appenrodt, RN
Orlando VA Medical Center*

Community Support — continued from page 7 (Orlando response)

As operations at the Beardall wound down, our Mobile Vet Centers were just getting started. Late Monday morning, the first of our MVCs deployed to The Zebra Coalition, a well-known support center for LGBT youth located three miles northeast of the Beardall on North Mills Avenue in Orlando. Survivors and friends of the slain had flocked there and our Mobile Vet Centers provided much needed support and counseling as the nation became familiar with the faces and names of those lost.

That timely deployment set a modus for VA community support, as **Sarita Figueroa, RCS Southeast District Director for the VHA's Readjustment Counseling Service**, allowed the community to determine the locations to which the vet centers would travel.

For example, a makeshift memorial began forming outside the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, located only miles north of the Beardall, so a Mobile Vet Center traveled to the location and provided support to mourners.

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An Orlando VA Medical Center Mobile Medical Unit and two Mobile Vet Centers stand ready to provide support outside the Beardall Senior Center in Orlando June 13.

posting the VA's location of services as soon as they were in place on Sunday afternoon. The Orlando VA Public Affairs team kept its Facebook, Twitter, and public website updated as offerings and hours changed quickly in the first few days, and ensured the public knew when and where the Mobile Vet Centers were located as they moved to support community recovery efforts throughout Orlando.

The Vet Center providers were able to connect with both English and Spanish-speaking media outlets in their travels through Orlando, and did a brisk business of explaining the VA's mission and extolling Vet Center benefits for Veterans and the community. There, among the public expressions of sadness and solidarity, they encountered thousands of people in need of counseling and comforting, and the Vet Center teams provided services until the memorials came to an end, and the family assistance center closed June 20.

Some of the VA's Finest Moments: Epilogue

Sadly, often it takes a tragedy to recognize the depth of an organization's character. The attack on Orlando's LGBT community brought to light some of our finest moments, and showcased our people as some of the best this city can offer. These are some of my personal observations during VA's response to the shooting, some of what I believe stood out in our efforts in the best way I can understand and explain them.

Another covered central Orlando June 15 as mass rallies and candlelight vigils were attended by thousands, and were broadcast around the world.

Events, memorials, and religious ceremonies took place throughout central Florida that week, and MVCs and VA providers attended most offering support and counseling. When Florida Governor Rick Scott and Orlando City Mayor Dyer established a family assistance center at Camping World Stadium (formerly the Citrus Bowl) in Orlando, a Mobile Vet Center and providers were among the first on location.

Heather Frebe, Orlando VAMC Public Affairs officer, made apt use of social media,

Epilogue: VA's Finest Moments — continued from pg 8 (Orlando response)

Planning: that the VA had a plan, assets, resources and competent, qualified people ready to move out at a moment's notice put us hours ahead of our peers in our ability to respond to this national special security event. The benefits of prior planning shone immediately and offered our community a most valued resource in its time of need. The dollars spent and human hours invested paid off immediately for Orlando, and the Orlando community readily welcomed those capabilities in the first critical hours and days.

Speed: was a huge mission multiplier, and our speed speaks to location, competence, capability, and most of all intent. Moving our capable response team forward, once directed, happened efficiently and effectively. Even more, the attitudes and desires of our people to help in any way possible increased our speed of response. People were leaning forward in anticipation of saving lives and bringing hope and comfort, not merely meeting a deployment order.

The Director's 50: The group of Orlando VAMC employees who volunteered in the speedy deployment of emergency management persons, services and assets, put us well ahead of our peers. The best compliments I heard were the dozens of Orlando VAMC voices asking how they too could be a part of the team in the future.

Attitude: there are none better in a crisis than those looking for ways to help, and wanting to employ their talents and expertise in doing so. VA people showed up quickly and stayed late because of an aggressively optimistic attitude that seems to imbue our organization in a crisis. That's the best way I can describe it.

Community: it was obvious from the start that we were not "with the government and there to help." It was never clearer to me just how much our people are part of the Orlando community than during this crisis. Consider the examples:

- A solid medical center LGBT program and well-respected program manager who had the community reaching out to her as she reached to them, able to bring comfort and support in the words and ways our LGBT community values;
- A suicide prevention coordinator (and mental health professional) able to reach out and generate overwhelming support while in transit, and then willing to climb into a squad car to deliver devastating news to families more than 12 hours later;
- A Mobile Medical Unit driver willing to navigate the twisting and narrow streets of old town Orlando if it meant saving lives...and even if it didn't;
- A Vet Center program ready, willing and able to move hundreds of miles at a moment's notice, and then stay for more than 10 days delivering help and hope;
- A VA nurse and logistics supervisor unafraid of grabbing the tissues and wading in deep when it was toughest to do, just because people needed help;
- A team of top-notch VA physicians, psychologists, social workers, nurses, and operations staff willing to ply their expertise in the worst of circumstances if that meant bringing just a little comfort and hope to the community.

The list goes on, and in each case, there is much to be proud of in considering the efforts and support VA men and women brought to this emergency response. Brazell described it as a 'horrific privilege' and I can't think of a better way to describe the efforts that begun on Sunday, June 12. I hope to never experience such a tragedy again, but if tragedy strikes, I'll be proud and fortunate to have this team of working class heroes beside me.



VA Undersecretary for Health Dr. David J. Shulkin (left) and Orlando VA Medical Center Director Timothy Liezert discuss VA response operations. "We are proud of all of you," the USH would later express to VA staff who participated in providing comfort and care to those affected by the tragedy.

Vet Center Staff Connect With The Community — continued from page 9



A Mobile Vet Center remained open late into the night June 12 as the VA team provided mental health and ancillary services to families of the injured and slain, and first responders.

“The Vet Center providers were able to connect with both English and Spanish-speaking media outlets in their travels through Orlando, and did a brisk business of explaining the VA’s mission and extolling Vet Center benefits for Veterans and the community.

There, among the public expressions of sadness and solidarity, they encountered thousands of people in need of counseling and comforting, and the Vet Center teams provided services until the memorials came to an end, and the family assistance center closed June 20.”



Therapy Dog *Journey* with Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi at the Beardall Senior Center in Orlando on June 13. The therapy dogs’ comforting presence was keenly felt and greatly appreciated.



See Director’s 50, pg 3

The Lake Eola candlelight vigil as seen from a Mobile Vet Center on June 15. For more than 10 days, four of these specially equipped RVs and their staff crisscrossed the greater Orlando area serving thousands of mourners.

Anatomy of a Death Notification — continued from page 10

The worst mass shooting in the nation's history occurred in the early morning hours of Sunday, June 12, in Orlando. Orlando VA Medical Center Psychologist **Dr. Mary Beth Shea** spent much of the two days following the tragedy working with local law enforcement and clergy, helping them notify families of the death of their loved ones.

She tells the story in her own words:

"I was deployed Sunday afternoon, June 12th, to the Beardall (Senior Center) where the families of the missing were gathering to get news of their loved ones. The atmosphere was extremely tense, as the families already knew their loved ones weren't on the hospital rosters, but there is always hope...until there is not.

On Sunday, the families met with the medical examiners and the Florida Emergency Management Mortuary Operations Response System team, or FEMORS, to give descriptions of their loved ones. That information was taken back to try to match it with someone in the morgue. When a match was found, the Medical Examiner informed Florida Law Enforcement, who then delivered the sad news to families.

Florida Law Enforcement requested a mental health person and a chaplain be with them when the families were notified. The notifications began Sunday night and went throughout the day on Monday. I was with two large families when they heard the news of their daughter and son being killed in this mass murder. The pain is difficult to describe, and was even more difficult to witness. There are no words that can help at that moment. The closest I was able to do was to be present with them, be compassionate, and give them all the time they needed to process what had happened.

Fortunately, as I said, both were large, extended families, and they had each other to cry with and hold on to. There was no rushing this. Time was not a factor. We just waited, touching when it seemed appropriate, crying with them, and rocking a baby when he awoke to the sound of his grandmother's pain.

Eventually, someone would ask, "What do we do now?" That's when we would take them to the next step: meeting with the FBI and/or the Attorney General's office (since this was a crime and they are victims), to learn about the assistance those agencies could give them.

We stayed with 'our families,' finally walking them to their cars and away from media when they were ready. —Dr. Mary Beth Shea



Inside the Mobile Medical Unit, Dr. Mary Beth Shea (seated right) leads the Orlando VA Medical Center Emergency Response Team following its arrival on June 12.

"Thanks to you your team for helping the community in Orlando begin to heal. In the face of such a senseless attack, it is heartening to see the VA family rally together and do everything you can to help."

— President Barack Obama, expressing his appreciation to the men and women who provided the VA response in Orlando.

From the Network Director:

We Are All Interconnected; Bringing Good Out of Tragedy



Miguel H. LaPuz, M.D.
Network Director, VISN 8

By Miguel H. LaPuz, M.D.

Watching the news not too long ago, I was struck by the extent of the algae bloom and its impact on south Florida. With the release of water from Lake Okeechobee now contaminated by pesticides and fertilizers, algae growth became toxic, growing out of control like cancer overtaking the body. These noxious blooms were so large and widespread, they could be seen from space.

Beaches and estuaries were overcome with the algae and people who usually visited the areas for recreation stayed away for fear of being sickened from it. Beaches were closed, fishermen didn't fish, and sea creatures and other wildlife were also harmed. The local economies were also impacted as restaurants and shopkeepers shuttered their doors without their usual holiday business.

The simple fact that farmers in central Florida have used dangerous chemicals for years caused a nightmarish cascade of events that affected people, sea life and nature through the thread of the thick, foul algae bloom. These events highlighted the truth about living things being interconnected.

In this interwoven world, the events in Orlando and more recently in Dallas, will affect every single American in ways we can't even fathom yet. Both events appear to have germinated from intolerance and hate.

Rationalizing Violence

History has demonstrated time and again the perverse capacity of humankind to rationalize violence against certain groups of people because they happened to be of different color, persuasion and beliefs.

Looking back on these events, we can't help but be horrified by what we now consider to be incomprehensible and unimaginable thought processes. But there may be a simple explanation--there were enough people in those times who thought similarly. Oddly enough, the intolerance might have started seemingly innocently and grew in magnitude as more people accepted that way of thinking while others who disagreed simply remained silent.

As rational and thoughtful human beings, we need to be vigilant against these toxic thoughts that run so contrary to tolerance and acceptance of our fellow men and women. During these times and in all of our interactions, we need to be even more understanding, more patient, more civil, and more attentive to one another.

Healing the Violence: VA Employees Respond In Orlando

We also need to celebrate our diversity as means to enrich our lives and society. More than ever, we need to practice what we believe and preach. We have to start at home, at work and in our neighborhoods. To avoid the downward spiral of intolerance, we need to break this cycle with understanding and charity for one another.

Some of us have already taken this road. I applaud the volunteers from Orlando VA Medical Center, the Veterans Readjustment Service and the network office who gave up their time with family and friends to console the victims and the families of those who were lost in the Orlando shooting tragedy in June.

During this trying time, VA employees were truly part of the Orlando community. They came early, stayed late and positively impacted scores of lives – and the people of Orlando appreciated it.

Interconnected — Continued from pg 12

Likewise, the VA Undersecretary for Health recognized these selfless staff for their dedication and commitment in performing the fourth mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs as a resource during natural disasters and emergencies. Recently, the President sent Secretary McDonald a personal expression of appreciation and gratitude for the great work done by VA employees.

In listening to the experiences of those who were on the ground there in the midst of grief, they too were blest by their interactions. They experienced firsthand the outpouring of love and support for loved ones and strangers alike. They were witnesses to the only thing in this work that can heal the violence in this world. It's the realization that we are all interconnected and that there is no "them" but only "us."

All Employee Survey Kicks Off August 8

The VA's **All Employee Survey** will be held from August 8 to 29 this year. The link will be active starting the first day of the survey. To access it, Click Here: <http://www.vaaes.org/>

You Speak. VA Listens. Everyone Learns. Based on network office employee feedback from the 2015 survey, the VISN 8 Network Office AES Workgroup has accomplished the following this year:

- Implemented the 'You're A Star' Employee-to-Employee Recognition Program
- Lunch N' Learns
- Party with a Purpose (to benefit area homeless)
- Fall TP Drive (to benefit area homeless)
- CREW Training for VA staff
- Veteran Staff Recognition – Vietnam Veterans Commemoration
- Recurring Network Director Column in VISN 8 Voice
- Continuation of Alternate Work Schedules – Telework, Compressed



Participation in the survey is voluntary. The information gleaned from the AES is of greatest use when employees participate and provide feedback. By voicing their opinions, staff take the first step in shaping their work destiny. Employees help leadership identify areas that need to be improved or changed.

In fact, **VA values employee feedback so highly** that the AES is a confidential and anonymous survey, including "open text" comments. This means that responses cannot be connected back to an employee name (since you never provide your name!), nor can an employee be identified through their computer workstation, phone or paper survey.

Protecting Employee Confidentiality: Applying the "Rule of 5." In 2016 and beyond, AES results are only shared when there are five or more responses in a workgroup or by demographic qualities – that is, five clerks, five female clerks, or five female clerks in Facility A. There must be at least five responses to show the data which protects employee privacy. .

If you have questions about this year's survey, please contact your VISN 8 AES Coordinator, Shari Florio (727) 575-8099 or e-mail her at shari.florio@va.gov.



Charles Barron

New Compliance & Business Integrity Officer Is Named

We welcome Charles Barron as the new VISN 8 Compliance & Business Integrity Officer. He will be based out of the VISN offices in St. Petersburg. He replaced Wayne Welge who recently retired after many years of faithful service.

Barron previously served as the Compliance & Business Integrity Officer and Integrated Ethics Program Officer at the Bay Pines VA Healthcare System. Before joining Bay Pines, he served as the Chief Administrative Specialist within the National Surgery Office (NSO) at VA Central Office.

Barron began his VA career in 2001 at the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital where he served as an Administrative Resident in the Graduate Healthcare Administration (GHATP) Training Program. Following that, he worked in the private sector for Johnson & Johnson and Apria Healthcare.

Barron received his Master's degree in Healthcare Administration in 2002 from Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. He holds an undergraduate degree in Biology from the University of Cincinnati and currently continues to support healthcare academics by serving as adjunct faculty within the College of Nursing teaching healthcare law and ethics at an area university.



3 Network Staff Selected for Prestigious Leadership Program

Three network employees have been selected for the **2016-17 Corporate Development Training Program**, one of VA's premiere leadership initiatives to create a diverse pipeline of well-trained and effective leaders. The program is designed for high-potential, high-performing GS 13-15 and title 38 equivalent employees.

Michelle Winslow and **Shilpa Patel-Teague** were selected for the **Federal Executive Institute Leadership in a Democratic Society**. This four week course focuses on organizational theory, the government policy framework and the global trends and events that shape government agendas. Participants earn 12 graduate credits when they successfully pass the course.

Seth Teague will be attending **Graduate School USA**, an Executive Potential Program that includes four one-week residential sessions. Designed by the Office of Personnel Management, the training's emphasis is on Leading Change as participants learn to think and work strategically to meet the visions and goals of their organizations.



4th Network 'Party With A Purpose'



On July 14, the VISN 8 office held its 4th Party with a Purpose at its St. Petersburg headquarters. The intent was to collect supplies to distribute to area homeless Veterans transitioning to residences. A small mountain of laundry detergent, dryer sheets, multi-purpose cleaners, toilet paper, cleaning tools and many other items were donated by generous staff members.

The donations were given to local VA homeless staff who spoke about the program and gave examples of how meaningful the donations are to the Veterans who receive them. Dr. Miguel LaPuz, network director, also addressed the group, emphasizing the importance of the homeless program and thanking the staff who work so hard to support it. The group then enjoyed a delicious buffet lunch with potluck items brought in by VISN staff.





**Pat Salsberg, Travel
Coordinator, Bay Pines
VA Healthcare System**

Focus on ConcurGov:

All-You-Ever-Wanted-To Know About Receipts for Travel Vouchers

By Patricia Salsberg, Travel Coordinator, Bay Pines VA Healthcare System

Greetings! This month's column is on the hot topic of required receipts for travel vouchers. This can be one of the most confusing issues in Government Travel and hopefully this column will clear up misconceptions on required receipts for travel vouchers.

VA Regulations:

□ **Travelers must provide receipts for authorized expenses based on requirements outlined in Volume XIV, Chapter 1, *Travel Administration*.** VA has the discretion to require a receipt regardless of the amount. However, the traveler must be informed of this written requirement before travel begins. Information on VA required receipts can be found at the following link, Appendix I, pages 44-45:

<http://www.va.gov/finance/docs/VA-FinancialPolicyVolumeXIVChapter01.pdf>

□ **Travelers are issued a Temporary Duty Travel (TDY) travel authorization to attend the training, meetings, site visits, and conferences.** Each traveler shall provide supporting documentation to attach to the traveler voucher with receipts when submitting for reimbursement of travel expenses.

□ **Receipts are required, regardless of amount, and authorization or approval by the official who approved the travel for the following:**

- **Baggage** - A receipt is required for all baggage expenses associated with the movement of Government and/or personal property of traveler for official travel.
- Authorized excess baggage (carrying of instructional materials to bring to/or back from TDY site.)
- Charges or tips for assistance by airport personnel with transporting and handling of Government equipment for official business.

□ **Common carrier transportation: E tickets issued for the use of commercial, air, rail, or bus service.** The itinerary must show the price of the ticket, e ticket number, and confirmation of payment. **(E tickets must be submitted as a receipt with the travel voucher).** E tickets can be found by using going to the following link for Duluth Travel, entering the record locator of the ticket and traveler's last name.

<http://www.duluthtravelinc.com/getItin.cfm>

□ **Commercial communication services (pre-paid phone cards, cell phones, Internet connections, long-distance calls when Government services are not available—**receipt will show total amount paid with a justification that services were used for official business.

□ **Dry cleaning and laundry are reimbursable when TDY is more than six consecutive nights of lodging and costs are reasonable for personal laundry, dry cleaning, and pressing of clothes.** A receipt is not needed for coin-operated laundry and dry cleaning machines.

□ **Lodging:** An itemized lodging statement with dates, lodging and tax amounts, with a zero dollar balance due must be submitted with the travel voucher.

"E tickets must be submitted as a receipt with the travel voucher."

Receipts *(continued)*

□ **Rental Car:** A final receipt issued by the rental car company upon completion of travel must be submitted. Insurance costs, GPS devices, and full-fuel options are not reimbursable and the cost of additional services or upgrades will be paid by the traveler.

□ **Receipts are required for gasoline purchased when using a rental car** (but not for travel via POV where travelers are reimbursed by mileage).

□ **Receipts are required for all other travel expenses only when the amount is in excess of \$75 or when required by the approving official.**

□ **Taxis:** If a traveler is using a taxi as a main means of transportation, recommend the traveler retain a receipt of each fare for record keeping.

□ **Professional Administrative Services:** Include the cost of printing a boarding pass, computer usage, fax machines, and scanners.

□ **Rental Car:** A final receipt issued by the rental car company upon completion of travel must be submitted. Insurance costs, GPS devices, and full-fuel options are not reimbursable and the cost of additional services or upgrades will be paid by the traveler.

□ **Shipments of government property by freight or express** – when property needed by the traveler exceeds the baggage allowance (e.g., if a Government Bill of Lading is not used), the traveler will explain the circumstances for the use of freight or express. The receipt will show the original point of shipment, destination, the number of packages, the contents and separate weight of each package, and the rate and amount(s) paid on the travel voucher.



Employee Travel Contacts Update for Network Staff:

The division of the alphabet has been updated as follows according to the first letter of the last name of the traveler:

Patricia Salsberg: Letters A-L, patricia.salsberg@va.gov, 727-398-6661, ext. 12283.

Donna Tyler: Letters M-Z, donna.tyler@va.gov, 727-398-6661 ext. 14205.

Troy Shields: Local Travel, troy.shields@va.gov, 727-398-6661 ext. 14201.

Suggestions for Upcoming Columns:

I'm open to suggestion for topics for upcoming columns. Please send any ideas or suggestion to me at patricia.salsberg@va.gov.





Franklin Edward Kameny served during WWII. Later, as a government employee, he was fired because of questions about his sexual orientation and his fight became the Gay Rights Movement.



"Dr. Kameny was honored by the American Astronomical Society and others for his civil rights work."

Gay Rights: American Veteran Launched a Movement

By Darlene Richardson, VHA Historian

In 1941, Franklin Edward Kameny was a 16-year old studying physics at Queens College, NY, when World War II interrupted his studies. He was drafted into the military to help defeat Hitler and soon found himself thousands of miles away from home in dangerous territory. He served in Europe with the 58th Armored Infantry Battalion, 8th Armored Division, 9th Army, during the war and was honorably discharged in 1946. After the war, he resumed his studies, graduating from Queens College with a B.A. in physics in 1948 and, later, an M.A. (1949) and Ph.D. (1956) in astronomy from Harvard University.

Fired in 1958: After graduation, he relocated to Washington, D.C. to accept a teaching position at Georgetown University and was hired by the U.S. Army Map Service in July 1957. His career was off to a smooth start until an employment background investigation raised questions about his sexual orientation. At the time, homosexuals were banned from federal service. He was fired in January 1958. His dream of a career as an astronomer vaporized before his eyes due to suspicions about him that had nothing to do with his work performance, ethics, or abilities.

Dr. Kameny fell victim to the 1950s political paranoia which had blacklisted or jailed many innocent people for their "disloyalty" and suspected ties to Communism. In 1953, President Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10450 which broadened the definition of "national security risks" to include "any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug addiction, or sexual perversion," as reasons for termination from federal employment. The State Department used the executive order to ramp up firings of suspected homosexuals, as they believed them to be more susceptible to blackmail by spies or other foreign government officials. Kameny fought his unfair firing through the Civil Service system's appeals process, then the courts, with the final "no" coming in 1961 when the U.S. Supreme Court refused his petition.

Injustice Helped Fuel The Fight: Like most war veterans, Dr. Kameny didn't throw in the towel and walk away at the injustice committed against him; instead, it only fueled the fight within him and, from the studious astronomer, an activist was born. That year, 1961, he founded the Mattachine Society as an organized means to stop the needless firing of homosexuals from federal service.

Dr. Kameny's fight became the Gay Rights Movement and grew to include lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals. In 1972, he became the first openly gay man to run for Congress. He didn't win the election, but he helped elevate the gay rights movement to the national level and relentlessly kept it there. Because of his aggressive efforts, on December 15, 1973, the American Psychiatric Association stopped classifying homosexuality as a mental disorder. In 1975, the U.S. Civil Service Commission stopped denying homosexuals the right to federal jobs.

OPM Issues Apology: Kameny was a tireless advocate who took on not only injustice in the civilian arena, but the military arena as well. He provided support, credible witnesses, led protests, carried signs, and helped publicize the numerous trials of individuals who were fired and willing to fight to win their jobs back. In 2009, Dr. Kameny received an official apology from OPM for his 1958 firing and his home was listed as a D.C. historic landmark. In 2010, he was present at the signing ceremony when President Obama's repealed "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and 17th Street at P and R Streets in D.C. was renamed "Frank Kameny Way" in his honor. In the past decade, he was honored by the American Astronomical Society and countless others for his human civil rights work. Kameny died at his home on October 11, 2011 from heart disease; VA provided a memorial marker for his gravesite in Congressional Cemetery. In 2012, an asteroid was named after him.

Four Steps To A Great Self-Appraisal

The fiscal year ends on September 30th. Staff has 10 working days from the end of the appraisal period to submit a Self-Assessment to their supervisor. This year, given weekends and Columbus Day, the due date for Self-Assessments is October 18th.

By regulation and according to collective bargaining agreements, supervisors must give their staff performance appraisals no later than 60 days from the end of the fiscal year which means they are due by December 1st every year. However, to accommodate awards processing, appraisals are sometimes due before December 1st. Those additional deadlines move from year to year depending on pay schedule and awards processing guidelines from Central Office.

Steps to completing a great self-appraisal

1. **Share your brilliant successes.** Look at previous feedback received, projects you've completed and initiatives you've launched — all excellent fodder. If you haven't done so in the past, [start keeping a performance journal](#). It will make your next self-appraisal that much easier to complete.
2. **2. Share what you've learned.** What have you learned in the past year? Look to identify the ways in which you've been able to enhance your skills; describe the new skills you've mastered and how they've helped you in [your career development](#). Describe how you've applied these new skills to your job and how they support the goals of your department and organization.
3. **3. Be honest.** Don't embellish your accomplishments. Think hard about how you choose your ratings for yourself. Your manager will likely want you to support your ratings so be prepared to provide examples of your successes (why you deserve that high rating) and examples of your not-so-great performance (why you may deserve a weaker rating).
4. **4. Take time to do it well.** Your manager can tell if you rushed your self-appraisal. So take the time needed to do it justice (schedule time for it in your calendar!). After all, your self-appraisal is all about you, and you're worth it! Use all the space/features provided in the form to tell your story.

And...

Keep track along the way. Create and save a “Self Appraisal 2016” document that you can add to as you accomplish things. That way, when it comes time to write your Self Appraisal, most of your work is done!



One-Stop Shop for Information & Reporting Incidents

Are you a VISN 8 employee with a question about a course of action or want to report an incident?

VISN 8 has an information-rich section on the [network Intranet](#) where you can find topics including Compliance & Business Integrity, Ethics, ORM, Quality Management/ Patient Safety, Research, Information Security, OIG/ General Counsel, Joint Commission and Whistleblower.

Each facility has its own specific reporting methods, however, regardless of where you work in the network, you can also report an issue or incident through this Communication vehicle.

To visit the site, [Click Here](#)

You're A Star! Employee to Employee Recognition Program

The 'You're A Star!' Employee to Employee Recognition Program is in full swing with network and VA medical center staff taking full advantage of the opportunity to express their gratitude to helpful co-workers. The program was created in June as a way for VISN 8 staff to show appreciation for one another for going 'above and beyond' -- or just to say "thanks for your help!" It began in response to feedback from the All Employee Survey as a way to increase staff civility, respect and engagement in the workplace.

How It Works: Print Version (Network Employees)

Employees who work in the Franklin Templeton Building in St. Petersburg can pick up a printed card, fill out the back and give it to their co-worker in person, slip it under or tape it to their office door, or present it during a staff meeting (how cool is that!). The cards are located in several high traffic areas on the 6th floor.

How It Works: E-Card (Network & Medical Center Employees)

VISN 8 Office staff and employees at the Medical Centers and clinics can send virtual cards to colleagues via the link below and employees will receive them in their VA e-mail. Access the program here: <http://vaww.visn8.portal.va.gov/Pages/Star.aspx>


If you have a question or comment on this new program, please send a note to the VISN 8 Office of Communication at VISN8communicationoffice@va.gov. **The front and back of the printed cards are shown below.**



To:

From:

Why You're So Darn Awesome:



About the VISN 8 VOICE

The **VISN 8 VOICE** is an e-Newsletter published by the [VISN 8 Office of Communication](#) for Network Office employees. Send comments and/or articles to the Editor, [Susan Wentzell](#).

